



## Chapter 7: Courting the Nightmare

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Despite the number of Valiants that were staying in Breth Ayahusasca, their hunting party was small indeed. Besides Rhyna and Laurel there was only Caoimhe, three Valiants alone to push back the Nightmare. No wonder Rhyna had made the trek to Old Sledge.

"They are fewer in number here than back home," Rhyna had tried to explain, "and well spread out to track our Valiants. They haven't yet formed a nest of vipers, but they're trying. They've begun growing an outpost of their own. It's still weak and hardly guarded, if we could stunt it now that would be a great help."

"Hardly guarded?" The warning bells had gone off for Laurel then. "Doesn't the growing require careful attention? Why don't they pull back and concentrate their numbers until the place is finished?"

Rhyna had shaken her head in dismissal. "The Nightmare makes little sense; I have long since stopped trying to understand it. But I do take your point. I plan to scout the area well and be certain no trap awaits us before we approach."

That had been two days ago. Now they were deep in the wilderness with no river nor road nor even the night skies to guide them. And despite her having no idea where they were going, Laurel had been put in the lead. So thick was the vegetation here that even the light-footed sylvari who could

normally bob and weave without a trace through the thickest undergrowth were forced to resort to the tactics of men and charr. Her axe led them, shearing a path through soft leaves and stubborn vines alike.

"I thought you said we could get dangerously off course moving headlong through the jungle like this," Laurel noted.

"Sure, If you're looking for one small outpost in the middle of it all," Rhyna replied. "But it would be impossible to miss where we're going. Though you can't see them now, ridges of rock funnel us from east and west. All we need to do is head south until the jungle stops. Then we'll be able to see quite clearly where we've wound up and where we need to go."

"Mount Maelstrom has the jungle burned back," Caoimhe added. "It erupts from time to time, and the ground is all stone with no place for roots to take hold. So when you reach a certain point, the jungle just stops."

Laurel was skeptical, but before she could question the others further, her foot caught on something squishy. She whirled with her momentum and managed to gather her feet under her again. The movement had carried her forward into a small clearing, and now silky pods surrounded her on all sides.

In the trees above, shiny carapaces clung to the trees like great, smooth boulders. First one broke away, and then another. They slid down like a lazy drips of syrup, then unfolded neatly into the shapes of spiders, landing lightly on the jungle floor and brandishing their dagger-like forelegs. Soon more began to drop from the vegetation above, chittering menacingly as they came to defend their communal nest.

Laurel drew her axe and motioned for Rhyna and Caoimhe to stay back. With any luck, she thought, they could retreat into the thick jungle and face only a few pursuers as

they pulled out. That was before a gob of hissing liquid arced through the air towards her.

It was said that spider venom could burn like acid and paralyze with the slightest touch. Laurel couldn't make her legs work fast enough, the world playing out in slow motion around her, but as the venom sailed towards her, a shimmering curtain lept up to catch it. It splattered harmlessly against the wavering air and dripped to the ground. The foiled attack spurred the spiders charge, but their speed only bounced them back the harder when they collided with the barrier.

Caoimhe held out a gnarled staff as she came up beside Laurel. Blue tendrils shimmered from it as she gave the younger Valiant a wink. "Let's see what you're really capable of, shall we?" Her eyes fluttered closed as she touched the top of her staff to her own forehead. Wisps of blue raced out from it across her skin, currents of ghostly flame consuming her dark figure in a blinding aura.

Laurel could not look away. The light burned her eyes, but she could not close them. It bored into her, reached through her and lit a matching fire in her soul. Every flicker and snap sent energy racing through her limbs until she thought she might burst. She felt invincible, invulnerable.

It was too much to contain.

She threw herself at the spiders. Nothing mattered except releasing the torrent that battered her from within. She let it out through the song of her axe, through the feeling of metal biting into chitin. Each swing was a blessed relief, a puff of steam let out of a kettle that ensured the lid wouldn't blow just yet.

Time was a blur, but eventually the rush dwindled. As the last sighs of power drained out of her, she awoke from her frenzy to find herself hacking the limbs from an already dead spider. Arrows embedded in its head had likely done the job some time ago, but that hadn't stopped her from playing the butcher.

She dropped her axe to her side and took a step backwards as her eyes went wide.

There was nothing left. The vegetation was trodden and tattered. Body parts and shards of exoskeletons were scattered over a gooey bed of spider innards. It had gone past self-defense and into mindless slaughter. It was an atrocity, and there putting her stamp on it was Feathers, helping himself to the choicest bits before other scavengers could join in. He quorked happily to her as though she had purposely made this feast for him.

Horror and embarrassment colored her cheeks. How had this happened? Why hadn't she seen what she was doing?

Rhyna pushed away from the ruined nest and bolted into the jungle.

"Rhyna!" Laurel called after her. "Wait! I didn't mean..." A firm hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Let her go." Caoimhe's calm was almost as unnerving as Rhyna's distress. "That one couldn't hold a grudge if her life depended on it. Her trail will be easy enough to follow if we have too, but for now let's give her some time to think."

"The Wardens knew." Laurel stared at the gore that covered her hands. "They saw this potential in me. They were afraid of me." She was afraid of herself, she realized.

"I saw it in you as well." Caoimhe's voice remained flat. "Sorrows swirl in you, but there's a fire as well. It hardly needed a nudge to be let free." Laurel recoiled from the words, but Caoimhe's grip held her in place.

"You did this!" she accused wildly. "On purpose!"

"Fire in your spirit is not a bad thing, sapling." The coolness of the words, their superiority, put Laurel in mind of the Firstborn in the Grove and the fight went out of her. Caoimhe felt the change and gave her a reassuring squeeze before letting her hand fall away.

"I haven't been called sapling in a long time." Laurel wilted at the memory. It felt a lifetime ago: before the Wardens had trained her, before she had murdered an asura

with her bare hands, before she had walked to the edge of the Dream and stared into the jaws of death. She was no sapling anymore. This was not something a sapling could have done.

"You fear yourself." It was not a question. "You shouldn't. I watched your bird flutter down in the midst of the carnage and though you didn't slow, neither did you harm a feather on him."

Lord of Feathers cawed angrily as black wings descended onto his personal feast. The larger ravens bullied him and in turn were bullied by vultures. The small bird did the only thing he could, he cawed a final defiance at his kin and flapped to Laurel's shoulder to preen. First, though, he rubbed his beak on her leaves to clean himself.

"He has the right of it," Caoimhe said, eyes scanning the jungle around them. She found a wide, soft leaf a few steps past the battle damage and broke it off at its stem. "Here, you will feel better when you're clean as well."

Wiping the gore away was a relief, but Laurel had hardly finished when they were discovered by boars. Three of them trotted boldly into the clearing, stirring up the vultures and ravens and adding their own squeals to the cacophony of angry caws. They ignored the sylvani, caring only about the feast and anyone who might get in the way of it. The wet sounds of their gorging nearly made Laurel sick, but Caoimhe was unphased as she watched the newcomers.

"In nature, nothing is wasted," she noted, and Laurel glimpsed for the first time the small farrow of piglets that pranced in delight. "Each death makes other lives possible. You should not be afraid of it, nor of inflicting it."

"All things have a right to grow," Rhyna countered as she stepped through the undergrowth to rejoin them. "Come, you don't want to stay here. This is not the only attention that will be drawn." Laurel followed gladly, but as she turned she she heard Caoimhe say something more. The words were so softly spoken that she couldn't be sure of what she heard, and in a moment more, Caoimhe followed her into the jungle.

As they continued on, Laurel's feelings mellowed. She couldn't hold a grudge, not even against herself, while her body was in constant motion. It was too strong a balm on her soul. The next time she would be more careful. The next time she would only kill in self defense and not step beyond those bounds, but what had happened had already happened. One family's death had fed another's children, and it was done. Rather than dwell on it she allowed her mind to be captured by the world around her. The jungle was a continuous tale of life and death and yet more life layered one over top of the next, and beneath that the bones of the land spun their own story as well.

Laurel had never seen land behave like this before. The jungle floor rose and fell so that in her imagination they were clambering over the buried roots of some great tree. She wondered what such a tree must be like. Roots this size would make it as large as the Pale Tree itself, if not larger, but could any tree compare to the Mother's size? It was a concept she couldn't quite wrap her mind around, and it slipped away when the real reason for the shape of the land revealed itself.

Abruptly the vegetation of the jungle fell away and laid the stony undulations bare for the eye to see. A bleak slope extended ahead of them, reaching higher and higher. It was not a tree that competed with the Mother for height, but the earth itself. Twining down that steepness were streams of black basalt. They looked like the raised burrows of massive worms, and it was these that gave the land its ripples.

"We're here," Rhyna said, staying close to the cover of the jungle and pointing west. Beyond the treeline, not too great a distance from where they had come out and in the last dip before the land began climbing, a small fort hunched in defiance of the desolation. It was clearly of sylvani construction, though incomplete and twisted, as different from Old Sledge or Breth Ayahusasca as anything Laurel could imagine. Its half grown walls were made of woven vines like those of Old Sledge, but where the walls of Old Sledge had

flowed around the town with a solid and unified purpose, these twisted about themselves in a tortured dance. They filled in unevenly with wicked arcs of sharpened wood standing beside gaping wrents. It was as though in its haste to grow strong the wall was tearing itself to pieces.

"One grower inside, three hounds, no defenders," Rhyna listed off what she saw. "We need to do a sweep of the jungle to make sure there are no others waiting to fall on us, but if that's all the resistance they've left, we can make swift work of things here."

The jungle was dense and easy to hide in, but difficult to pass through without leaving a trace. They found several trails which led away from the fort and followed them carefully. There was no sign of recent passing, and Caoimhe probed the surrounding vegetation with her staff as they went. No hiders were stirred up; no animals cried alarm in the distance. When Rhyna was satisfied there would be no trap, they returned to the edge of the jungle to peer down at the fort.

The lone sylvari inside was seated with her gray-green head bowed. Two dark hounds circled her sulkily with none of the playfulness or curiosity that Cuain would have shown.

"We could take her out from here," Laurel whispered. There was no reason to whisper this far away, but it felt safer. "Or at least, you could. Your bow could reach."

Rhyna shook her head. "I won't kill unless I have to. She may yet be swayed back from madness."

"There is no turning back from the Nightmare," Laurel argued. It was well known. All saplings were taught to be wary of the lure of Nightmare, for once it had you in its clutches there was no escape.

"But she may not be fallen yet. To sympathize with Nightmare is not the same as to walk in it. I will talk to her before I draw weapons against her." Rhyna's tone left no room for debate, and Laurel had no choice but to follow when the others started down towards the fort. While her bow

might have been able to reach the fort, her skills were no match for the distance. It would do little good to give themselves away with a missed shot, better to wait and get within reach of her axe.

The dark hounds saw them first. Their sulkiness shifted swiftly into rigid aggression as they formed up on their lady, and the sight of it broke Laurel's heart. She had known that those who joined the Nightmare Court turned dark and twisted over time as the Nightmare took root in them, had known it would happen to their hounds as well, but she had never seen it with her own eyes before. These beasts were more wolf than hound. The lush greens of their leaves had withered away and hardened to thorn. Purple and red streaked through their brown stems, and their faces were contorted with a pain inseparable from rage. That someone could do this to a hound made heat rise inside Laurel. The certain knowledge that these would be Cuain if he were found by the Court fanned that heat into flames and curled her lip in a snarl. It was matched by snarls from the hounds, and the grower rose to her feet.

"How nice of you to come visit us!" she greeted as she strode to the largest gap in the wall. There she remained with her animals about her, her eyes as mocking as her voice. "Have you come to turn away from false teachings?"

"We've come for you," Rhyna answered. "Help us tear down this place and come home."

"After all the work I've put into it?" The Courtier smiled sweetly. "Now why would I want to do that?"

"So that you might live," Rhyna returned. The Courtier only laughed.

"You come to threats so quickly! What a fine Knight of Nightmare you'll make."

Rhyna reach for her bow, but Caoimhe raised a hand to stop her. "Wait. There may be another way."

"There is always another way." A cruel smile turned up the corners of the Courtier's mouth. "Not all of them are



painful, though my favorite ones are. I can show you. I've shown many others already." For the briefest instant her eyes flickered down to the wolves at her side while her fingertips caressed the whip at her belt.

Rage exploded inside Laurel. She didn't need the mystic fire from Caoimhe to light her emotions this time. She had found her own wellspring of power and it easily drowned out the fear that tried to nag at her. Even a repeat of the spiders would be better than this woman deserved.

The wolves sensed the change in Laurel, and then everything seemed to happen at once.

The beasts charged, clearing the gap in the wall just before Caoimhe could seal it off with a barrier. Six arrows were already streaming from Rhyna's string, but when they reached the shimmering blue curtain, they ricocheted sharply. One caught her in the shoulder even as the wolves fell on them. Rhyna was the first to be tackled, the trained animal throwing its weight against her and carrying them both to the ground. Laurel angled her shoulder into the rush as another bore down on her, tucking her head away from the seeking fangs even as the animal's weight bowled into her. She stepped into it, pushing back with every bit of strength she could summon, and for a moment it was as if the Mother's own roots embraced her, holding her steady and keeping her on her feet. The beast floundered backwards, knocked off balance as much by surprise as by a final thrust with her arm.

"Stop this!" The words were Caoimhe's, but Laurel didn't have attention to spare for them. Her world shrank to two as she traded feints with the wolf, knowing that she could neither give an opening nor miss one. Her weapon was small and light, meant for an asura, flashing out and dodging back almost as fast as if it had been a sword. It kept the animal at arm's length as they circled.

Laurel did not make the first mistake. An angry command flitted at the edge of her awareness, and the wolf leapt. This time she was ready with her axe. Although it was

light, what weight it did have was centered behind the blade. When it found its mark in the side of the leaping beast's throat, it bit deeply. The force deflected the animal's body aside, and after two staggering steps it collapsed to the ground.

There was a moment of stillness as Laurel looked up to the rest of the fight. Rhyna had managed to get the wolf off of herself and was struggling to her feet, the stunned animal lying nearby. Caoimhe stood well back, her staff out before her, but the third wolf was nowhere near her. Instead its eyes were locked on Rhyna.

"You leave her be!" Laurel roared, drawing its attention. The last thing she saw before the animal overtook her was Caoimhe's barrier beginning to dissipate, but she didn't have time to worry about the Courtier joining them.

This wolf was bigger than the last one, and faster. Laurel was only just able to turn aside its lunges, and though her steel left marks in its hardened hide, she couldn't find the time nor space to put power behind her blade. Rather than ending it quickly, she left a progression of slowly oozing gashes on the beast's muzzle. Each wound she inflicted cut her as if she were inflicting it upon her own hound, but she closed herself to that pain, forcing each slash to become another layer of armor hardening around her heart, another bough tossed on the blaze of her fury until it became a condensed thing, white-hot. In it she found a precision to her movements that she had never before achieved. She pressed the tortured beast back, vowing to put it down for the sake of the hound it had once been.

But as she raised her axe for the next strike, a sharp pain cut her wrist and threatened to make her drop the weapon. She tightened her grip in defiance, and dozens of tiny thorns hooked into her like the claws of a cat. The Courtier's whip wrapped itself more tightly around her wrist, savoring her resistance.

Fangs closed on Laurel's forearm, pinning her free arm to her chest as sylvari and beast crashed together to the ground. The air was knocked from her lungs even as pain blossomed in her shoulder from her restrained arm wrenching backwards.

She wrestled one-armed with a flurry of leaves and thorns, desperately using her own flesh as a barrier, feeding a forearm to the beast to keep it from her throat. She kicked at the hind legs of the animal atop her, and in that moment of distraction when the jaws slackened, she threw her weight to the side, rolling with enough force to jerk the taught whip from the Courtier's hand.

It didn't buy her much time, the wolf's weight falling again on her back, but this time she had an arm beneath her and she thrust herself upward at the same time as she jerked on the whip. Its fine teeth scored the creature's belly, giving it a start that allowed her to regain her feet. One haggard breath was all she got before the beast was on her again.

Fangs closed once more on her forearm, but this time she let them. She still had another hand free, and that she wrapped behind the animal's head as she drove forward, forcing her forearm deeper into the beast's maw. It gagged and jerked, trying to pull away, but Laurel's grip was solid. Then, with a final surge of strength, she made the quick motion that would end the creature's life. A sharp snap rang through the thin dust on the air.

As the body fell away limply, Laurel set to prying the thorn whip free of her wrist. It was not shy about taking flesh as it was removed, but that was the least of her worries just then. A quick glance showed her that the remaining wolf was atop Rhyna again, the wood of her bow holding its fangs at bay, yet Caoimhe still stood back. A flicker of confusion sparked through Laurel.

Then a burning orb issued from Caoimhe's staff, brilliant like the sun. It drifted as if in slow motion towards Rhyna. Then it exploded.

Confusion roared to fury. They were betrayed.

Laurel whirled her axe as she charged, and though Caoimhe's staff leapt up to meet it, turning aside the blade did not stop the assault. Laurel flowed with the movement and struck again. Once, twice, three times her blade bit into her opponent's weapon, too fast for the larger weapon to make a counter attack. Then they found the limit of how much abuse the staff would bear. With the fourth strike it splintered.

"You would turn on me?" Caoimhe demanded, tossing aside the ruined pieces, but Laurel had no use for a traitor's indignation. Her blade flashed again. This time Caoimhe knocked it aside with her own flesh. The audacity of it spurred Laurel on, but the next attack was caught as easily. Caoimhe brought her arms up and took the full force of the blow on her forearms. The steel left hardly a mark in that toughened bark. It was as hopeless as chopping down an ancient oak with a pocket knife.

"Delightful!" the Courtier called, and the closeness of her voice startled Laurel. Though she was still well back from Laurel's range, she inched towards her whip. Laurel grimaced, but pulled back to stand between the Courtier and her weapon.

Caoimhe lowered her arms and regarded Laurel coolly, seemingly unphased by the attack. This was a sylvari well acquainted with her own limits; she'd known how little Laurel could do against her from the start. It cast a new light on the spider incident. When Caoimhe spoke, her tone held the same calm certainty it had then. "You've already turned to the Nightmare."

"And the Nightmare has made you strong," the Courtier supplied. All that Caoimhe lacked in reaction, the Courtier made up for with glee. "That strength is welcome to us, not shunned. Embrace it."

"I serve the Dream," Laurel asserted, denying their power over her. The Courtier moved nearer, closing in on her from the opposite side as Caoimhe, but they were both still

unarmed. Laurel gripped her axe more tightly. The first one to come within her range would regret it.

"What is the Dream but an illusion?" The light of fanaticism burned in the Courtier's eyes, and Laurel felt herself giving ground despite her best efforts, inching backwards as the Courtier's presence pressed in on her. "The Dream clouds our vision, sends us scurrying after meaningless tasks, but the Nightmare can cut through it! The Nightmare can set you free. You were made for it, your strength! We would encourage it, grow it, put it to use fighting the dragons, not chasing the blind ambitions of a centaur's ghost!"

An arrow suddenly took her through the throat. Rhyna was alive.

"The hounds attacked us, not her." Caoimhe's voice betrayed a hint of heat, but she made no move to close with Rhyna and finish the job she'd started. "No sylvari needed to die today. Is this what the Dream has reduced us to? Righteous anger that pits sister against sister?"

"The Dream is more than that," Laurel said stubbornly. *It's what Cuain and I shared, what still binds us.* "It's who we are, what makes us."

"I make myself," Caoimhe spat. "Better free in the Nightmare than chained to the Dream, if this is what it brings us."

"You don't mean that." Rhyna rose unsteadily to her feet.

"But I do," Caoimhe returned. "I've seen you Laurel. In Breth Ayahusasca. In that handshake. I know the power of your anger, the depth of your sorrows." She drew in a slow breath through her nose. "If that is what the Dream has brought you, I want no part of it."

Laurel quivered as a new fear spread over her. She was so accustomed to seeing the Dream in a way others could not that she hadn't even considered it might have been a mutual sharing. Always before the visions had been one way.

This was new. How much of her dark secret had leaked out of her? It would be like candy to the Court. If they knew, they would stop at nothing to possess her. She would be hunted, and if they took her they would turn her, would turn Cuain. Her precious hound would become no more than a soulless, slaving beast.

But she could still stop it, here and now. No one else yet knew.

Laurel carefully slipped her axe into the loop on her belt and raised her horn to her lips. It's crystal note rang in the open air, and before three heartbeats could pass, a flurry of white feathers fell on Caoimhe's face. She cried out and made to grab the raven, but she was too slow. He was gone again as quickly as he'd come, flapping up out of harm's way. Caoimhe clutched at her ruined eye, and in the time it bought her, Laurel took her bow from her back and put a single arrow to the string. Caoimhe looked up and took in the arrow trained on her. One dark eye stared into Laurel, burning with hatred, daring her to take the next step.

"Wait!" Rhyna's voice was shaky but clear. "No matter what she says, she is not of the Nightmare! Doubts rule her heart, not darkness. Doubts can be set aside."

Laurel held for a moment. Maybe Rhyna was right. Maybe Caoimhe hadn't yet fallen to Nightmare, but after all this day had seen, it was unlikely. Even if she only teetered on the brink, her descent would come soon and happen swiftly. They wouldn't know it until she was gone, and then it would be too late to stop her from bringing her knowledge to the Court. If that happened, then Cuain... *No. I have to end it here.*

Laurel fired one shot. At this range she could not miss.